Turn Your Yard Into a Certified Wildlife Habitat

by Jodi Helmer | Updated: July 29, 2019 | 1 Comments

Environment, Gardening, Home and Garden

Small creatures are struggling with a big issue: Birds, bees, butterflies, frogs and rabbits are among the wildlife facing homelessness, evicted from their environments as a result of habitat loss and degradation.

Due to development, infrastructure and agriculture, millions of acres of wildlife habitat have been wiped out. More than 290 million acres of grasslands — an amount of land equivalent to 130 Yellowstone National Parks — have been converted to cropland. The World Wildlife Federation calls habitat loss "the greatest threat to species."

Your garden could help come to the rescue.

"The best way to help wildlife is to restore the natural environment," explains David Mizejewski, a naturalist with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF).

To encourage gardeners to prioritize landscape features that provide wildlife a backyard habitat, nonprofits including NWF, Audubon Society, Monarch Watch and North American Butterfly Association (NABA) have established certification programs (for details, see chart "Lawn Certification Programs at a Glance"). They offer instructions on how to honor efforts to garden for wildlife and save the birds and pollinators like bees and butterflies — and award certification to those who encourage native species to take up residence in their greenspaces.

NWF has certified more than 230,000 wildlife-friendly habitats since its Certified Wildlife Habitat program was introduced in 1973.

Certification Program Requirements

Most programs have five specific requirements:

1. Build a Pollen, Nectar, Fruit and Seed Buffet

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A hummingbird searches for backyard pollen.

Native plants, which are indigenous to a specific geographic area and have evolved to thrive in local conditions, provide the best sources of pollen, fruit and seeds for wildlife. Both Monarch Watch and NABA certify gardens that provide native nectar sources and host plants.

The best plants for your garden depend on where you live. In the Northwest, serviceberry, Russian sage and Pacific rhododendron are great choices while gardeners in the Southeast might plant wild columbine, coral honeysuckle and spotted bee balm.

Providing appropriate sources of food is important. Mizejewski notes that some birds won't eat berries from exotic plants and butterflies and moths rely on native host plants for both food and nesting sites. Birdfeeders can be a component of a wildlife garden but Mizejewski warns, "Birdfeeders are only a supplement to habitat; you should plant the plants that wildlife need to survive."

Your garden needs three different kinds of food sources such as seeds, berries, nectar plants, suet or birdfeeders to qualify as a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

2. Supply shelter

Wildlife need safe spaces to hide from predators or seek shelter from the elements. Mature trees, shrubs, thickets, rock piles, burrows, ponds and brush piles are important components of a backyard wildlife habitat. Manmade birdhouses and other nesting boxes can also add to the shelter. Adding at least two to the garden will help you earn t habitat certification. The Audubon Society asks gardeners to keep domestic cats indoors to protect birds in the garden.

"Plants will provide most of the shelter needed in your garden," Mizejewski says. "Instead of planting one tree or bush, mimic Mother Nature and plant an entire shrub row; dense plantings provide more cover and places for wildlife to hide."

Consider adding roosting boxes, birdhouses, butterfly boxes, beneficial bug hotels and toad abodes, which provide shelter while adding decorative features to the garden.

3. Offer a Drink

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A garden gnome watches over the birdbath.

A clean source of drinking water is essential to support wildlife but the H_2O in a wildlife habitat is for more than sipping. Birds use shallow water for bathing while butterflies absorb nutrients from the soil/water combination found in natural puddles. Don't have a pond or wetland in the backyard? Fountains and birdbaths also qualify as acceptable water sources, notes Mizejewski.

"If you place the bowl of the birdbath on the ground instead of on a pedestal, turtles and rabbits will be able to get a drink, too," he adds.

You'll need at least one source of water to earn certification.

4. Provide natural nurseries

If you want to help boost the wildlife population, you need to provide a place for creatures to raise their young. Birds nest in trees; snakes create burrows under rock piles; and frogs lay eggs on plants near water sources. Giving wildlife at least two places to raise their young counts toward certification.

If dead trees don't pose a hazard, Mizejewski suggests leaving them in the landscape, explaining, "Woodpeckers will excavate cavities that provide shelter for insects and 96 percent of backyard birds feed insects to their young."

5. Sustainable gardening practices

"None of these efforts will matter if you're dousing the yard with chemicals," Mizejewski says.

To keep the landscape healthy for wildlife, you must use at least two sustainable practices to earn NWF certification, including:

- Eliminating chemical pesticides and fertilizers that could harm or kill vulnerable creatures.
- Removing nonnative plants and animals.
- Installing a rain garden or using drip hoses or soaker irrigation to reduce water use.

Certification Costs and Processes

The cost and process for certification vary between organizations. NWF charges a $20 application fee; Monarch watch charges $16 and the application at NABA is $15; certification is awarded on the honor system. Each chapter of the Audubon Society sets its own rates for certification. All charge additional fees for yard signs.

In addition to providing wildlife a place to call home, pursuing certification has broader benefits.

"The program helps wildlife but it also helps connect people to nature," explains Mizejewski. "Hanging a sign in their garden helps promote the message and build awareness about the importance of wildlife habitat."

Lawn Certification Programs at a Glance

Organization and Program	National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat
Requirements	Food, water, cover, places to raise young, sustainable gardening practices
Application Process	Online application, honor system
Cost	$20 application fee; garden signs starting at $30
Organization and Program	Audubon Society Wildlife Sanctuary Program
Requirements	Food, water, shelter. No national program; some local chapters operate their own programs with unique requirements, which can include minimum square footage, removal of invasive plants and keeping domestic cats indoors.
Application Process	Varies by local chapter; some have online application and schedule a site visit with a volunteer certifier.
Cost	Must be a current Audubon Society member + pay a fee that varies depending on property size. Local chapters set their own rates.
Organization and Program	MonarchWatch Monarch Waystation Program
Requirements	Minimum 100 square foot garden in sunny location; shelter, nectar plans, milkweed, regular garden maintenance, including eliminating insecticides and removing invasive species.
Application Process	Online application fee, honor system
Cost	$16 application fee ($33 for application and garden sign).
Organization and Program	North American Butterfly Association Certified Monarch Garden
Requirements	Native caterpillar food plants, native nectar sources, minimize pesticide use.
Application Process	Online application, honor system
Cost	$15 application fee, $25 for garden sign.

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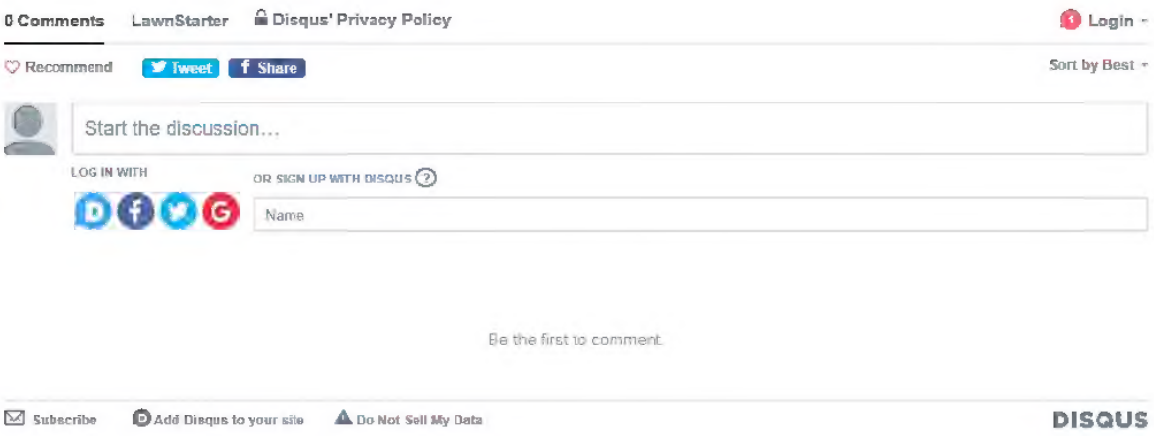

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